

The BJP at the Centre and in the States: Divergence, Big Time

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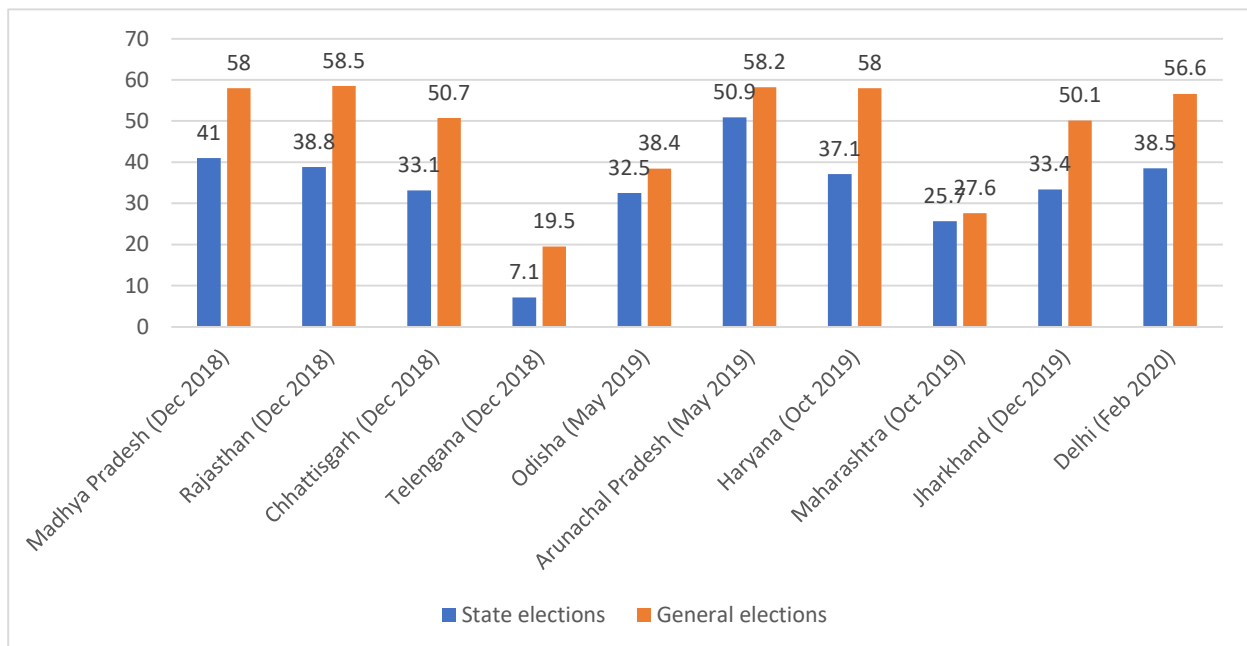
Summary

Over the course of 2019 and 2020, a clear trend has emerged in India's political landscape. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, performs much better at national elections as compared to state elections. This reveals a fundamental contradiction of the BJP. On the one hand, Modi's popularity is crucial to winning nationally; on the other, the absence of strong regional party leaders weakens the party's prospects at the local level.

In February 2020, the Aam Admi Party (AAP) won the [Delhi elections](#) by a landslide. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was a distant second, securing only eight seats (out of 70) with a vote share of 38.5 per cent. Strikingly, just nine months earlier, in May 2019, the BJP had won all seven seats from Delhi at the general elections, with a vote share of 56.6 per cent. This massive divergence in the BJP's vote share between the national and state elections has now become a trend.

Figure 1 shows the vote share of the BJP in national and state elections, whereby the latter were held either shortly before (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Telangana), concurrently (Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh) or shortly after (Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi) the general elections. The differences are striking.

Figure 1: Comparison of the BJP's vote share in national and state elections, 2018-20



Source: Election Commission of India.

This trend contradicts two previous empirical trends. First, as [noted by Sanjay Kumar](#), since 1989, when state and national elections are held simultaneously, the dominant party polled a

similar number of votes. There are only six exceptions to this rule in the period 1989 to 2018. Odisha and Arunachal Pradesh, which elected their state governments in May 2019, together with the national elections, now adds to this short list. The BJP obtained as much as six percentage points less in vote share for the state elections as compared to the national ones in Odisha and eight percentage points less in Arunachal Pradesh. The only state that confirmed the historical trend was Andhra Pradesh, where, however, the BJP is a marginal force (it obtained less than one per cent of the vote share in both cases).

Second, political scientist [Nirmala Ravishankar showed](#) that anti-incumbency is a considerable force in Indian politics. Her research showed that, when a party is governing one state for more than two years before the general elections, this has a strong negative impact on that party's performance. According to this historical trend, the BJP's performance (at the general elections) in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand could be expected to be far from spectacular. However, as shown in the figure, the party's vote share exceeded 50 per cent in all cases except Maharashtra (where the BJP was in a seat-sharing agreement with the Shiv Sena).

What explains this divergence? In many ways, the BJP can count on the same kind of resources for both types of elections. The party has the same organisational advantage over its competitors in terms of a better trained and much larger number of party workers, and it can count on a disproportionate amount of financial resources. The vicinity of the state and national elections also means that the economic and political situation is not massively different.

The main difference is thus leadership. This factor has two aspects. First, the BJP is reluctant to nominate strong state-level leaders as chief ministerial candidates before the state elections. This reflects the degree of centralisation of the party apparatus under the leadership of Modi and Home Minister, Amit Shah. As the duo is not willing to allow any strong regional party leader to emerge, state elections are fought under the leadership of the prime minister himself. Voters, however, increasingly reward parties which have strong local leaders that they can portray as their chief ministers.

The second aspect, strongly intertwined with the first one, is that Modi's popularity remains the BJP's strongest asset. However, it is clear in the minds of the voters that, no matter how much they love the prime minister, he will not be running their state. [Sardeep Shastri shows](#) that Modi's popularity was a crucial element in the 2019 general elections. Three points are worth noting. First, Modi was the preferred prime ministerial candidate of 46 per cent of the respondents, up from 35 per cent in 2014. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi came at a distant second at 22 per cent. Second, among those who voted for the BJP, about one third (32 per cent) said that they would have voted differently had Modi not been the prime ministerial candidate. Among voters of BJP allies, one-fourth responded likewise. Finally, Modi was the most preferred choice for prime minister even among those who were dissatisfied with his government's economic performance.

Two final remarks are in order. First, the poor performance of the BJP at state elections might end soon. Over the next months, there will be elections in Bihar (October 2020) and Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (around May 2021). Apart from the states where it has no real presence (Kerala and Tamil Nadu), the BJP is the front runner in two states (Bihar and Assam) and is expected to perform very well in West Bengal. The divergence between national and state vote share might continue, but the BJP, at this point in time, is expected to perform

well in these states. Finally, the importance of Modi for the BJP is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it contributes massively to the party's performance at national elections as well as to ensure that party workers are motivated and resourceful. On the other hand, it hardly masks the inherent weakness and fragility of the BJP.

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